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ABSTRACT

In summer 1987, the Maricopa Writing Project held two faculty workshops to encourage community college instructors' involvement in writing across the curriculum. Faculty from all seven campuses in the Maricopa Community College District and two educational centers, representing fields such as Accounting, Administration of Justice, Art, Economics, Mathematics, and Nursing, as well as others, were brought together on the basis of their interest in helping students develop more useful learning strategies, improve their critical thinking skills, and become more capable and confident writers. Participants engaged in a variety of activities, including: (1) researching recent journals in their fields to discover innovative efforts involving writing, and writing abstracts of the most useful material; (2) forming interest groups for special study on the topics of "Writing for Learning," "Writing and Thinking," "Raising Students' Value for Writing," and "Improving the Quality of Student Writing"; (3) adding a significant writing assignment to a class they regularly teach; (4) making a brief presentation on successful past activities; and (5) writing and sharing their own work. An evaluation of these activities is presented in this document, along with recommendations and conclusions. (EJV)

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Project Report

The Maricopa Writing Project

Summer 1987

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Julie Bertch, Director

Faculty Staff Development

Introduction. Writing is more than just an important literacy skill; it's a facility, an expertise, that affects one's interaction with the world in some very pervasive ways. Proficiency in writing is considered a mark of the educated person; the able writer is admired while the poorer writer is not so well regarded--sometimes not even taken seriously.

The esteem we have for good writing is appropriate; writers are well aware of its value. They know that writing can be their means of discovery and learning. Writing helps them connect new information to what they already know, letting them make better sense of what they're learning and gain a better understanding of its significance. Also, they know that writing gives their ideas clearer definition and greater permanence, that as they struggle for words to fit their meaning, their ideas become more specific and more substantial. They can feel the sense of power and pride that comes with writing well and from having one's written work acknowledged.

They know as well that writing is a skill developed only through practice, that while many writers seem to have a natural aptitude, good writing is almost never easy. No matter how fluent we become, we still jump to revise and to say it better--more precisely, more clearly, and with greater strength and impact.

Teachers in every discipline know all this (whether they recognize it obviously or more implicitly) and agree that their students need to be better writers. Such awareness was the impetus for early efforts and still underlies every faculty-generated writing-across-the-curriculum program. As well, it is the basis for the assumptions upon which the Maricopa Writing Project was planned:

These assumptions are:

that writing is a powerful way of learning,

that students achieve more in every field when their classroom activities and homework assignments include writing,

that students' greatest needs include skills in critical thinking and practice in becoming more independent thinkers and purposeful learners, and

that we can improve student performance through offering instructors new options in teaching methods and classroom activities by encouraging them to use writing in their courses in ways that enhance student learning.

We believe that when students use writing in their work, they learn <u>more</u>, because writing demands their active involvement. They learn <u>better</u>, as the imprint is stronger in their minds and they retain their understanding of the information better. As well, they learn <u>differently</u>, in that they gain a personal connection to the material and make sense of it through their own frames of reference, allowing them to go beyond recognition or recall and into application and creativity.

<u>Discussion.</u> The purpose of the summer faculty writing project is to provide information and experience that will lead to increased involvement of community college instructors in writing across the curriculum. We believe that faculty in both traditional and occupational programs will find ways to improve their students' success through writing. As well, we believe the project serves those faculty who are concerned about their students' ability to fulfill expectations in advanced work. These teachers, recognizing that their students may have difficulty in upper division studies, continue to seek ways to help those students develop skills that will increase their chances of success, and they know that students who can command a useful repertoire of writing strategies and techniques have a significant advantage.

Attempting to serve faculty as widely as possible, this year's Writing Project brought together instructors from all seven colleges and the two new educational centers. Their fields included Accounting, Administration of Justice, Art, Business Administration, Counseling, Drama, Economics, English, History, Mathematics, Nursing, Psychology, Reading, and Sociology. These participants were recruited by their campus writing coordinators and staff development coordinators on the basis of their interest in helping students develop more useful learning strategies, improve their critical thinking skills, and become more capable and confident writers. Each participant had the choice of a $720 stipend or 3 hours of non-academic credit toward progress on the salary schedule. Participants taking the stipend could also choose to pay $189 tuition to the university and earn 3 hours of graduate academic credit. None chose the non-academic credit; seven paid university tuition for academic credit.

This summer's participants engaged in a variety of activities:

1. They researched recent journals in their fields to discover innovative efforts involving writing. This time spent at the university library was highly regarded as an opportunity to do what we seldom have time for--to catch up with our discipline.

2. They wrote abstracts of the most useful materials found in their library research and compiled an annotated bibliography. Participants then recommended articles from this informal publication for particular interests so others could request copies.

3. They formed interest groups for special study on the topics of Writing for Learning, Writing and Thinking, Raising Students' Value for Writing, and Improving the Quality of Student Writing, all areas which had been defined through a pre-workshop questionnaire. Each group made a presentation that outlined critical issues and offered recommendations, involving the entire group in considering the topic.

4. Each participant undertook the addition of a significant writing activity to a class he or she regularly teaches. To do so, we reflected (in writing) on the characteristics of our students, the nature of our course, and our individual teaching styles and preferences so that we could design activities most likely to promote student success. We shared our ideas for these new assignments and planned to come together later to discuss the results.

5. Each participant who had previously used writing made a brief presentation about an activity that he or she has found successful in the past. Others created an activity for the group.

6. And everyone wrote--working on an article for a journal, a proposal for funding or development, a chapter in a text, or a piece of creative writing. In small groups, these writers shared their work, asked for comments, revised their work, and returned it to the editing group.

Evaluation. Participants were asked to rank the value of each project activity on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) and to add comments explaining the basis of their opinion.

1. University work. The participants researched recent literature in their respective fields to find materials dealing with writing in their content areas. They selected the most useful articles and wrote abstracts to include in an annotated bibliography. They were extremely positive about this activity, giving it an average of 4.7 on the scale of one to five. Their comments included these remarks:

> I was pleased to get reacquainted with the literature and gained a new awareness of how important WAC programs are,
> It was extremely helpful--I "discovered" a new journal,
> Our schedules rarely permit this, and I appreciate the opportunity,
> It was fun and refreshing--a sense of being back in touch with the student within me,
> It was excellent, wonderful--add another day,
> I loved it--a good basis for the rest of the project,
> I recalled how inefficient I am when I begin research and how successful I feel upon completion of it,
> It was very good for me.

2. Group presentations. Focusing on an area of interest in writing for study, the participants planned and presented a discussion of the topic to the group. This activity was also considered quite positive; the average ranking was 4.1. These are their comments:

> The focus helped integrate ideas,
> It was a wonderful demonstration of value of group work to clarify thinking,

This was creative and innovative, excellent.
It was useful and I learned a great deal,
It highlighted the need for WAC,
It was interesting but not as beneficial as the research,
This was the weakest area because of my lack of background,
It was sometimes uneven.

3. Adding writing to a course. The participants wrote to characterize their students, their courses, and themselves as teachers. In doing so, they gathered information that would help them design an effective writing assignment to add to a syllabus to improve student learning and understanding. The average rank given this activity was 4.5. Their comments follow:

It led to new insight,
It stressed the practicality of what we were doing,
This assured me I would follow through because it gave me a usable piece of work,
I enjoyed creating my <u>first</u> specific new classroom writing assignment,
This is a technique every teacher should use,
It was important because it forced me to commit myself to trying some new techniques,
This strongly motivated to encourage WAC at my college,
This is a good structure and format for raising teacher awareness,
I hope I'll be able to include all the activites I've planned,
It made me realize there are ways not only to enhance students' abilities but also the teacher's ability to present ideas and material,
I am inspired by this opportunity to focus on class writing after reading and discussion,
It provided me the opportunity to see myself as students see me--I will modify my program this semester,
I'm overwhelmed by the unlimited resources to enhance student writing--how do I select just one to start with?
I have so many things to try out that it will be tough not to try to put them all in one semester.
I'm not sure it helped.

4. Individual presentations. The participants chose one writing technique that has been successful in their course in the past (or if they have not used writing assignments, they planned something for future classes) to present to the group. They gave this activity an average of 4.7 and made these comments:

> This was an opportunity to get some wonderful ideas with hints to make them work,
> I enjoyed hearing how things are actually applied,
> This helps me see what others do and get their opinions and thoughts,
> Being able to share innovative techniques sparked other ideas for me,
> These were very practical for application to other disciplines,
> This activity raised respect for others as teachers,
> I got some good ideas--and am pleased to learn so many good things are happening in our district,
> I was glad to learn from master teachers--their enthusiasm is motivating,
> My challenge will be to make these concepts into actual classroom activities,
> It was excellent because of the attitude and respect I derived from seeing professionals from other disciplines strut their stuff,
> It was informative and useful; lent us some creativity in incorporating techniques to improve student learning,
> I have many new ideas I'm eager to try.
> Some of the ideas were too content specific.

5. Writing. During the project, the participants were given time to work on any kind of writing that they wanted or had a need to do. They then shared that work with a group of their peers for comment and response. The average ranking given this activity was 4. These are their remarks:

> This was helpful because it makes us realize how our students feel about our assignments,
> It got me started again!
> I received beneficial feed back,
> It was good practice in practicing a peer review technique,
> It was wonderful to have writing time to meet my own needs,
> It gave me an opportunity to think and organize my ideas, gave me some free editors,

It's a somewhat frightening chore (as our students tell us) but I got helpful and constructive suggestions,
I gained a lot by commenting on others' writing,
I would have liked to know in advance for planning,
Since we were hesitant to critique others, it tended to bog down,
There was just not enough time.

6. The Writing Project. Finally, the participants were asked to describe what they found useful, valuable, or rewarding about participating in the project. These are their remarks:

Going to the university,
Being exposed to the problems in using writing and then finding and sharing the solutions--and recognizing my students' problems are not unique,
Exchanging ideas and philosophies--it was beneficial and personally rewarding,
Meeting and exchanging ideas across disciplines,
Realizing I can assign short writing assignments,
Learning new approaches,
Getting to know faculty from other campuses,
Learning about new teaching techniques, about the connections between writing and learning and thinking,
Interacting with some wonderful people.
The renewed respect, appreciation, and acceptance of other teachers and a new discipline--writing,
Being re-energized by the enthusiasm of others and the feeling we can improve what we do,
The marvelous experience--I really enjoyed the sharing, open and caring attitudes,
Knowing I have some great techniques to take back to my class,
Writing,
Hearing different points of view,
Meeting faculty I didn't know before,
Getting paid to learn what I needed to improve my classroom techniques,
I have been inspired--I know how truly important it is for me to have my students write and I have some practical and concrete ways to do it,
I used my brain more than I have in a long time.

7. Recommendations. Participants were asked to add any comments, ideas, or suggestions that would help in planning next year's project. There were not many; most of these

remarks were compliments on the methods, the style, and the enthusiasm of the workshop. One or two asked for more information on specific writing techniques and more direct instruction in using them in their classes. Another, (an instructor in an occupational area) asked that we include more occupational faculty.

The project, I believe, was eminently successful. The participants found it so, believing they had spent their time and effort in a very worthwhile way. In addition, they began to realize that they had become a community, a network of faculty with a sense of common purpose and a renewed enthusiasm for their work. Last year's Writing Project experience tells us that that network will continue to exist and to be valued.

Recommendations. If we agree that the project should continue, we need to consider how we can best assure its success. Faculty interest and commitment are not a problem; the major concern is funding. I am convinced that faculty need to be paid for their summer participation--it is the best method for reserving their time and has historically been the way our institutions have indicated their value for an activity.

For the past two years, we have depended on staff development money that was tentatively allotted for the project, along with whatever else was still available in that budget at the end of the academic year. While this funding is greatly and gratefully appreciated (it was only through its support that the project was possible at all), the uncertainty about its exact availability is a problem--planning and recruitment begin too late and the number of participants has had to be limited.

While I believe the project is appropriately placed and should continue as a faculty staff development activity, I think it should not deperd solely on this budget. I recommend that we discuss possibilities for augmenting these funds--perhaps with professional growth summer project money or by asking the colleges to pay a registration fee for each faculty member attending.

We might also consider the possibility of compressing the project into a week-long, more intensive seminar and reserve part of the activities for fall semester. This plan would allow faculty to try out the writing assignments in their remodeled course outlines and share their experiences in meetings or workshops from time to time. Such a plan would let us facilitate further involvement of faculty and help in recruiting for future projects as well.

We might consider ways to find incentives for faculty participation other than pay that would build on the commitment to writing that already exists. For example, a faculty member might elect a year of Writing Project participation instead of serving on a campus or district committee, or a college might choose to give released time to participants who might then direct some campus activity dealing with writing across the curriculum.

Conclusion. Through these two summer workshops, I believe the Maricopa Writing Project has shown itself to be a useful activity that has been helpful to faculty and has enhanced the reputation of the colleges both locally and nationally. I believe that the ultimate benefit will be to our students in all our colleges as the expectations for writing increase in their courses and their skills develop to meet those expectations. It is my hope that we will find a way to continue the work of the Maricopa Writing Project on an annual basis and extend its benefits. That goal will have my best efforts.

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